

The Mayor Parks his SUV in the Red

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Of course he does. Undoubtedly, mayoral privileges in most American cities extend this far, as no honorable personage should be late for a luncheon or a press conference due to a lack of parking. However, the visual impact created by a politician's SUV, as it sits imperviously in the red, is revealing; in the midst of downtown poverty, it symbolizes a widening gap that separates the privileged from the poor and brings to mind an interesting question: what are the possibilities and limitations of *the city*, in a general sense, a place that

exists as both a concept and an expression of human activity? To begin, we consider the climate of its creation.

A Realm of Troubled Circumstances . . .

"All cities are built with their ruins in mind, even if only subconsciously . . ." (1). Author Darran Anderson goes on to note that there are ". . . hidden momentary pleasures of life taking place in monuments built ultimately for oblivion" (2). With these notions, the troubled circumstances of any large city, rife as such places are with poverty and corruption (as well as art, culture and renewal) are given context. The imagery of oblivion contrasting enjoyment is powerful, emphasizing the pathos of modern life. I consider these ideas while strolling through downtown San Diego, California, encountering scenes that reflect Anderson's thesis dramatically.

. . . And Shadows of Demise

Large cities are usually landscapes of disparity, the glories of state displayed to awe visitors and inhabitants alike, luxuries for the fortunate and subsistence for the multitudes. This is nothing new. However, in our age of technological wonder, it would be lovely if the gap between rich and poor could narrow for the benefit of all, rather than widening for the advantage of a few.

Walking to the City Administration Building, on an average morning, gives me occasion to reflect; the issues of society are vastly complex and poignant, far too much to evaluate at an early hour. Instead, I pause momentarily to appreciate our architecture, those beautiful angles of glass and concrete, so many monuments approaching their eventual end. If San Diego has indeed been built with its ruins in mind, perhaps we can see shadows of demise beginning to emerge, even now.



Author Photo (Downtown San Diego, 2022)

Anderson goes on to note that utopian desires come from dissatisfaction with the present, lending additional context to my reflections. Roads and buildings are merely human inventions, so we should not ask too much of our decaying monuments or burden them with overarching ideals — not in all fairness. Also, and quite importantly, the city is more

than the focus of today's dissatisfaction, a location that prefigures its own destruction; as an archetype, of sorts, it writhes and flourishes as the center of continual action, a place aptly described by novelist Italo Calvino:

"I arrived here in my first youth, one morning, many people were hurrying along the streets toward the market, the women had fine teeth and looked you straight in the eye, three soldiers on a platform played the trumpet, and all around wheels turned and colored banners fluttered in the wind" (3).

This passage brings to mind a fanciful port town, where vitality conceals the evidence of decline; people hurrying and catching sight of strangers, perhaps accompanied by loud music, everyone moving under the watchful flags of the state, those colorful banners that decorate the wind. Contrasting elements abound. Indeed, dreams and sorrows coexist in every city, all, perhaps, awaiting their eventual status as ruins. My morning walks give me a great deal to consider. Interestingly, the current mayor's SUV stands as something of a witness to these reflections, reminding me that ours is an unremarkable city enjoying its moment of influence.



Author Collage from Stock Images

Recently, I was fortunate enough to receive workspace in the administration building, a former storage cubicle I share with a colleague, a gray box where we quickly check emails before heading into the field for our patrol shifts — just downstairs from the mayor and members of our city council. Apart from the irony of the situation (given my tendency to criticize our leaders) it prompts me to wonder about the coming years.

Armed Guards Presiding

San Diego is a large American city of average qualities, but also quite pleasant with an air of Southern California ease, containing less destitution than many of its contemporaries. In recent years, initiatives to restore our downtown streets have succeeded, upholding the tourist industry with high-end restaurants and uplifting the wealthy with upscale housing. In previous decades, downtown had been a place of shadow and intrigue, a no-go zone for most citizens. Now, so many things have been beautifully improved — for a few.

Although crews sweep and clean diligently, the tents of homeless citizens remain, standing adjacent to Civic Center and the offices of our politicians. Moreover, the encampments we see scattered downtown, a few here and there, belie the dozens that linger in other parts of the city. Ours is a mild case of dystopia, but ominous, nonetheless.

On an average morning, I pass shifting tent communities, listening as occupants sort through belongings, some quietly, others shouting nonsensical obscenities to their companions, this, as people in ragged clothes gather to use the restroom, armed guards presiding.

“Shiny, Terrible and Wonderful”

Although San Diego’s difficulties are nowhere near those of San Francisco or Portland, Oregon, growing communities of tents and blue rain tarps (so often used as makeshift shelters) don’t bode well for “America’s Finest City.” Again, our situation is not unique, but a stroll through Civic Center really ought to give one pause. What are the solutions? Does the City of San Diego — or any other large American city — know how to provide for those in need? Do the leaders of these cities actually care?

I think back to Anderson and wonder about the years to come.

"The future will be old. It may be bright and shiny, terrible and wonderful but, if we are to be certain of anything, it will be old. It will be built from the reconstructed wreckage of the past and the present and the just-about possible" (4).

In the midst of Civic Center, an example of mid-century architecture approaches the clouds, gazing defiantly at the coming decades. I wonder how its ruins will contribute to the future of San Diego. Will it become a makeshift dwelling for people of the apocalypse? Perhaps its foundations will support emerging technology, becoming a "smart building" that scans your vital signs and scrutinizes your credentials upon entry. The old will thus become new, "shiny, terrible and wonderful," but not necessarily better in any meaningful sense.



Author Photo (Civic Center, San Diego)

Whether we consider the past or the present, the contrasts of city life are always startling to behold. At one moment, we see a man in a well-tailored suit and spiffy bow tie striding with purpose, briefcase in-hand; the next moment, we see a man in feces-encrusted pants, wandering in a state of hunger and confusion, both spending their days in the heart of downtown. And the gap that separates them, wide though it may be, continues to grow.

The Pleasures of Comfortable Denial

Upon entering the City Administration Building, and passing the guards who preside over metal detectors, one is met by a bank of elevators — and a television. From time to time, silent images of politicians greet those who enter, establishing a certain atmosphere for their visit. If you arrive at the right time, you will witness the most recent council meeting being replayed throughout the morning, a subtle reminder of recent events and decisions. Our city's leaders are always pontificating about something, expounding on grand agendas that never seem to materialize, and such things need to be televised in the lobby, apparently.

With so many glaring images of contrast in mind, the obvious is difficult to ignore; we appear to be a civilization teetering on the edge of collapse but still living in comfortable denial. The future, whether dystopic or miraculously rescued by technology, will indeed be constructed from ruins of the past. And, as we stroll through downtown, its shadows emerge into evidence. Perhaps Italo Calvino would be alarmed.

In time, there will be a new mayor, one who will likely resemble his or her predecessors, blithely parking in the red as tent cities grow and clouds of decline continue to gather.

References:

(1) Darran Anderson. *Imaginary Cities: A Tour of Dream Cities, Nightmare Cities and Everywhere in Between*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015). (p. 35).

(2) *ibid.*

(3) Italo Calvino. *Invisible Cities*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 1974). (p. 9).

(4) Anderson, p. 225.

For Further Reading:

Eric Mumford. *Designing the Modern City: Urbanism Since 1850*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018).

Monica L. Smith. *Cities: The First 6,000 Years*. (New York: Viking, 2019).